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# Promoting the agenda for a social Economic and Monetary Union: Attention, credibility and coalition-building

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## **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the crisis, new instruments of economic governance have been adopted at the EU level. Until recently, these have been strongly dominated by what I assume to be the ECFIN coalition. However, at least since 2011, this coalition's supremacy has been challenged by the competing coalition's (EPSCO) willingness to rebalance the economic governance so that social concerns are better taken into account. Hence, drawing on the agenda-setting literature in the EU context, this working paper aims at retracing the process that has led to put this issue of the social dimension of the EMU on to the EU political agenda. Three hypotheses are made concerning the rise of this issue, the strategies employed by agenda-setters, and the policy subsystem of the economic governance. First, this study shows that the interest in this issue has been gradually fostered 'from below', at the level of the European Parliament and the European Commission. Second, due to its 'high politics' nature, this issue could only be initiated 'from above' (European Council) and then expanded to lower levels of decision-making (Commission). Specifically, DG EMPL has managed to attract attention to this issue and to build its credibility in dealing with it by strategically framing the issue and directing it towards the EPSCO venue. Finally, I analyze the outcome of this agenda-setting process by assessing to what extent the two new social scoreboards which form part of this social dimension have been taken into account during the 2014 European semester. The result of this analysis is that the new economic governance has not been genuinely rebalanced insofar as its dominant policy core remains that of the ECFIN coalition.

Since the early days of European integration, the debate on whether the deepening of the Internal Market should go hand in hand with the development of a social dimension regularly stirs passions and creates division among scholars and decision-makers alike. With the Maastricht Treaty and the preparation of the single currency, the debate on the conciliation between the ‘social’ and the ‘economic’ tended to focus on the potential effects of a monetary union on national social protection systems. Three kinds of fears were generally associated with the development of a monetary union: the undermining of social spending as a result of a stronger fiscal discipline; the “race-to-the bottom” as regards labour market flexibility; and the use of social policy as a factor of adjustment in case of an asymmetric macroeconomic shock.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the financial and sovereign debt crisis which has been affecting the European Union (EU) since late 2008, the discussion on the incomplete nature of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) has been reopened. In particular, the abovementioned fears have come again to the forefront in view of the new instruments of economic governance adopted to tackle the crisis. In chronological order, the ‘Lisbon Strategy’ has first been reformed and relabelled ‘Europe 2020’ in an effort to promote necessary structural reforms in the EU so as to achieve ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’.<sup>2</sup> Then, more crucially, the so-called ‘Six-pack’ entered into force on 13 December 2011. It consisted of a set of five Regulations and one Directive aiming at enhancing fiscal surveillance by strengthening the moribund Stability and Growth Pact, as well as macroeconomic surveillance under the new Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP). In addition, the ‘Six-pack’ laid the foundation for the new yearly monitoring cycle of the national economic and budgetary performances, namely the European semester. Finally, the Treaty on Stability, Coordination

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<sup>1</sup> S. Fernandes and K. Maslauskaitene, “A Social Dimension for the EMU: Why and How?”, *Notre Europe Jacques Delors Institute*, Policy Paper no. 98, September 2013, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> European Council, *Conclusions 17 June 2010 Council*, Brussels, 17 June 2010, p. 1.

and Governance (TSCG) and the ‘Two-pack’, respectively, entered into force on 1 January 2013 and on 30 May 2013, complementing this new architecture by further reinforcing fiscal surveillance in the EU and the eurozone in particular.

According to some scholars, these instruments have to a large extent been determined by economic-oriented actors such as the European Central Bank (ECB), the Directorate General for the Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN) and the ECOFIN Council.<sup>3</sup> Possibly due to their supposed shared conception of economic governance,<sup>4</sup> social concerns have, at least until recently, been overlooked in favour of an ‘austerity-centred’ approach in the European semester. However, this approach has never achieved a consensus. A variety of political actors coming both from the European and national levels have been trying to reshape it, notably by integrating social considerations into the new economic governance. In this regard, the European Council of 13-14 December 2012 is illustrative of the alleged new emerging trend to deepen the social dimension of the EMU. This trend is also reflected in the European Commission (EC) Communication of 2 October 2013 entitled ‘Strengthening the social dimension of the EMU’.<sup>5</sup> At this stage, it is still not clear whether this recent development can be assimilated to a rebalancing of the economic governance by taking better account of social issues.

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<sup>3</sup> C. de la Porte and E. Heins, “Game Change in EU Social Policy: From Optional Re-calibration to Coercive Retrenchment”, in E. Xiarchogiannopoulou and M. Rodrigues, (eds.), *The Eurozone crisis and the transformation of democracy*, London, Ashgate, 2013 (forthcoming). [http://carolinedelaporte.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/intrusiveness-chapter\\_10june\\_final.pdf](http://carolinedelaporte.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/intrusiveness-chapter_10june_final.pdf) (last accessed 7 May 2014); P. Pochet, “What’s wrong with EU2020?”, *ETUI Policy Brief*, no 2., Brussels, ETUI, 2010 ; P. Copeland & S. James, “Policy windows, ambiguity and Commission entrepreneurship: explaining the relaunch of the European Union’s economic reform agenda”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1-19.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Jepsen, “The modernization of Europe’s social agenda in a global perspective: ‘rebooting the social’, in *A Europe of achievements in a changing world*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009, pp. 71-84 and C. Barbier, “Ordolibéralisme et économie sociale de marché: la voie allemande de l’Europe?”, *OSE Opinion Paper*, no. 10, juillet 2012.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission: Strengthening the Social Dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union, COM (2013) 690 provisoire, Brussels, 2 October 2013.

Therefore the following questions will guide us throughout this working paper: How did the issue of the strengthening of the social dimension of the EMU ended up on the EU political agenda? What path had this issue followed on its way to the EU political agenda? Which actors drove this agenda-setting process? Using which strategies? Has the new economic governance really been ‘socially’ rebalanced?

Answering these questions is relevant on several accounts. For starters, in light of the social disasters experienced throughout the EU as a result of the austerity policies implemented since 2010, this potential rebalancing is worthy of analysis. Moreover, in the context of growing Euroscepticism, making economic governance more attuned to social problems may be essential to increase the public’s faith in the European project. As Jürgen Habermas has explained, the only remaining narrative capable of mobilizing the population is that of a Europe protecting the citizens’ ‘European way of life’ in the face of globalization.<sup>6</sup> Besides that, from a purely scientific point of view, looking into this subject is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it will shed light on the maturing process of the building of the new economic governance and on its recent developments, which have been little-studied to date. Second, this paper also tests the fairly recent agenda-setting approach developed by Princen in the EU context. It will identify some of its limitations and complement it thanks to other theoretical approaches, notably the ‘strategic framing’ approach developed by Mark Rhinard and the ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (ACF) built by Sabatier and his colleagues.

Drawing on the abovementioned theoretical approaches, I will thus retrace the process that led to the agenda-setting of the social dimension of the EMU. Since ‘controlling agendas is about controlling participation’<sup>7</sup> in the conflict, particular attention will be paid to the

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<sup>6</sup> J. Habermas cited in F. Vandenbroucke, “Europe: The Social Challenge. Defining the Union’s social objective is a necessity rather than a luxury”, *OSE Opinion Paper*, no. 11, July 2012, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> S. Princen, “Agenda-setting strategies in EU policy processes”, *Journal of EU Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 7, 2011, p. 929.

dynamics of conflict underlying this agenda-setting process. I assume that this process is driven by the opposition between two coalitions willing to translate their beliefs into the new economic governance and to acquire or maintain a seat at the decision-making table: on the one hand, the dominant 'ECFIN' coalition already in place and, on the other hand, the challenger 'EPSCO' coalition. In accordance with Princen's theoretical model, I will assume that the 'EPSCO' coalition has faced two challenges to get a say in the European semester, namely gaining attention and building credibility. Furthermore, in addressing these challenges it is likely that this coalition has tried to affect two specific factors: policy frames and venues. However, despite the fact that the EPSCO coalition benefited from a window of opportunity to reshape the new economic governance, we will see that the rival coalition has managed to water down their proposal and to maintain their dominant position therein.

The remainder of this working paper is organized as follows. The first section lays the theoretical foundations of my analysis. The second section begins by describing the initial domination of the European semester by the ECFIN coalition. After that, the first attempts by the challenger coalition to reshape the economic governance are examined in the context of the adoption of the 'Six-pack'. Afterwards, I explain how a window of opportunity gradually opened in late 2012 under the impetus of the European Council and how the EPSCO coalition took advantage of that. Then, I elaborate on the negotiations within the EC around the communication of 2 October 2013 and explain how the EPSCO coalition's proposal has been watered down by its adversaries. Finally, I briefly scrutinize to what extent the proposal to include two new social scoreboards to take better account of social issues in the economic governance has been followed by its actual rebalancing.



# **1 Setting and shaping the EU political agenda: strategic framing, venue shopping and advocacy coalitions.**

## **1.1 Agendas and issues**

Drawing on Kingdon's seminal work on this subject, one can define the 'agenda' as the list of issues to which people in a given polity are paying serious attention at any given time.<sup>8</sup> The literature usually distinguishes between three different types of agendas, depending on who exactly is paying attention to the issue at stake: the decision-makers, the public or the media.<sup>9</sup> However, because the EU decision-makers may be viewed as disconnected from public opinion and the media sphere,<sup>10</sup> the most relevant type of agenda to be studied in this paper is the EU political agenda.

As an agenda is generally constituted of different issues, we still need to explain what is meant by these 'issues'. According to Cobb and Elder, an issue can be defined as a 'conflict between two or more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distribution of positions or resources'.<sup>11</sup> The added-value of such a definition lies in the notion that what differentiates a simple topic from an issue is the battle between opposing political actors about how this topic should be defined and dealt with, and by whom. Consequently, this research will inevitably bring us to study the process of issue definition as well as the political turf war between the different actors involved. But before addressing this question, it is worth saying a few words about the career usually pursued by issues on their way to the political agenda

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<sup>8</sup> J.W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, New-York, Longman, 2011, updated 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> S. Princen, "Agenda-Setting in the European Union: a theoretical exploration and agenda for research", *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> L. Buonanno & N. Nugent, *Policies and policy processes of the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> R.W. Cobb & C.D. Elder, *Participation in American Politics. The Dynamics of Agenda-Building*, Baltimore, MD and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1972, p. 82.

## 1.2 Issue careers

A fruitful model explaining how issues arise and evolve was developed by Cobb *et al.* in 1976. These authors began by identifying four stages of an issue ‘career’: initiation, specification, expansion and entrance.<sup>12</sup> Princen *et al.* have subsequently developed valuable theoretical tools based on this model. The latter suggest making a distinction between types of agenda processes in the EU according to the route taken by the issue to enter the agenda, either ‘from below’ or ‘from above’.<sup>13</sup> The two routes are presumably governed by two different underlying logics (political and technocratic). A given issue takes the route ‘from below’ if it is placed on the agenda by experts working in Commission expert groups, Council Working Parties, by lobbyists, or even by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) via their reports in the EP Committees.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, it takes the alternate route ‘from above’ if it enters the agenda via the European Council. These considerations have consequences for the four stages of issue careers elaborated by Cobb *et al.*<sup>15</sup>

To begin with, the way an issue is initiated will vary, depending on whether it comes from above or from below. In the European Council, placing an issue on the agenda is often linked to the saliency and the symbolic implications of a shared political problem; in an expert community, an issue arises more often as a result of professional concerns. During the *second phase* of the issue career, when a general issue is translated into a series of demands, the venue in which it is discussed will impact the framing of the problem. In the route from above, the European Council tends to roughly point out the guidelines regarding a specific issue. On the other hand, expert groups will be much more precise when drafting their

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<sup>12</sup> R. Cobb, J-K. Ross and M.H. Ross, “Agenda Building as a Comparative Political Process”, *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 70, no. 1, March 1976, p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> S. Princen & M. Rhinard, “Crashing and creeping: agenda-setting dynamics in the European Union”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 13, no. 7, 2006, p. 1121.

<sup>14</sup> L. Buonanno & N. Nugent, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> S. Princen & M. Rhinard, *op. cit.*, pp. 1121-1123.

proposals on a given issue. As I will further elaborate below, the way an issue has been framed will undoubtedly reflect the belief systems shared by political actors in certain venues.

However, one should bear in mind that this model is an ideal-type. As Princen and Rhinard rightly point out, an issue may start taking the route from above but then be left out in the cold and require lower level officials to take it up again. Furthermore, one could well imagine that the two routes may combine so that at a given stage of its career, an issue would take the route from above and at another the route from below. Besides that, Princen suggests that agenda-setters willing to move an issue on to the agenda always run the risk of facing what he calls vertical and horizontal ‘blockades’. Horizontal blockades occur when competing policymakers within the EU are able to keep an issue off the agenda, whereas the vertical blockade occurs when Member States themselves are reluctant to allow the EU level to get involved in a given issue.<sup>16</sup> Briefly said, an issue career is most often anything but a long quiet river. These last remarks are at the very foundation of my first hypothesis: (H1) As a ‘high politics’ issue – meaning that it is perceived as affecting national sovereignty –<sup>17</sup> the social dimension of the EMU has been initiated ‘from above’. It was then expanded to lower levels of decision-making in order for it to be specified. Throughout its career, this issue has faced both horizontal and vertical ‘blockades’.

In order to more fully explain how this issue has been specified and how it has been perhaps ‘hijacked’, we need to take a closer look now to the strategies used by political actors in the agenda-setting process as well as the interests that they pursue by influencing the political agenda.

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<sup>16</sup> S. Princen, *Agenda-Setting in the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> L. Buonanno & N. Nugent, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

### 1.3 Agenda-setting strategies

A very insightful analysis of the strategies deployed by political actors to place issues on the EU political agenda has been elaborated by Princen.<sup>18</sup> In his view, while seeking to move an issue on to the agenda, these actors are faced with two challenges: gaining attention and building credibility. Each challenge can be met using two different strategies. In order to gain attention, they need to mobilize potential supporters around their cause and arouse enough interest in it. To build their credibility, they have to demonstrate their sufficient capacity and convince of their authority in dealing with a given issue. In order to do so, agenda-setters can affect two factors: frames and venues. The following sections detail this model. *Policy frames, interest and authority*

In his book on the policy shaping strategies of the Commission, Mark Rhinard provides a subtle analysis of policy frames as well as of their strategic use by political actors. He defines a ‘policy frame’ as ‘an interpretative construction of a policy problem that offers a rationale for change while also proscribing a course of action and particular solution’.<sup>19</sup> Generally speaking, the scientific literature accounts for three functions of a policy frame. First of all, it provides us with a formulation of the problem which explains what is at stake and how the problem should be diagnosed. Second, it suggests a solution to the defined problem by identifying possible routes of action to tackle it. Finally, a policy frame offers a normative reason which justifies these actions. That being said, Rhinard argues that officials from the Commission can strategically mobilize these policy frames to promote policy change, especially by manipulating the institutions and by creating coalitions. Drawing on earlier studies on the subject, Rhinard argues that three criteria have to be met for a policy frame to be effective: it has to be sufficiently vague to allow mobilizing a wide array of

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<sup>18</sup> S. Princen, “Agenda-setting strategies in EU policy processes”, *Journal of EU Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 7, 2011, pp. 927-943.

<sup>19</sup> M. Rhinard, *Framing Europe: the policy shaping strategies of the European Commission*, Dordrecht, Republic of Letters, 2010, p. 37.

actors; it should not bring about a too radical institutional shift; and it should be in line with commonly accepted popular values.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Copeland and James have shown that the framing success of Europe 2020 by DG ECFIN was largely due to the fact that they had provided a policy frame that perfectly suited the Member States' positions in the Council.<sup>21</sup> For Princen, this framing process is especially relevant insofar as it raises interest in a certain issue. In other words, some officials from within the Commission can be thought of as 'frame entrepreneurs'.<sup>22</sup> Princen contends that frame entrepreneurs can arouse interest for a specific question in two ways: through 'big words' and through 'small steps'.<sup>23</sup> The first strategy involves linking the issue at stake with overarching values deemed to be central to the EU's identity or with policy commitments. Framing through small steps consists of highlighting certain less politicized aspects of an issue and progressively attracting support for policies. However, raising interest is not enough for an issue to come on to the agenda. Princen indeed argues that an effective policy frame in the EU context also needs to convince competing policy makers and Member States governments of the legitimacy of the EU involvement with respect to this issue ('claiming authority').<sup>24</sup> This effort of persuasion may be particularly tricky with respect to issues such as the one studied in this paper. Strengthening the social dimension of the EMU means that the EU should care about social issues, which is not self-evident at all. Policy actors willing to develop such a social dimension would therefore need to present strong arguments in favor of

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<sup>20</sup> M. Rhinard, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> P. Copeland & S. James, *op. cit.*, p.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to underline that owing to the internal coordination structure of the Commission, some DGs hold structural advantages over others as regards policy framing. This is especially the case for the lead DG who is holding the pen for the first legislative draft. See M. Hartlapp, J. Metz & C. Rauh, "Linking Agenda-Setting to Coordination Structures: Bureaucratic Politics inside the European Commission", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 35, no. 4, p. 431.

<sup>23</sup> S. Princen, "Agenda-setting strategies in EU policy processes", *Journal of EU Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 7, 2011, p. 933.

<sup>24</sup> S. Princen, *op. cit.*, pp. 936-938.

this EU intervention, not least a legal basis and arguments circumventing the subsidiarity issue.

In Princen's perspective, claiming authority can be achieved by framing the issue in two broad ways. First, one could link an issue to established policies either by arguing that this issue falls under the remit of the EU or by demonstrating that these policies have an impact on the issue. Second, agenda-setters may also identify 'common challenges' for the whole EU which could only be properly tackled at the EU level. In sum, several strategies can be used by prospective agenda-setters in order to arouse interest in the issue they care about and to claim their authority to deal with it. Depending on certain factors outlined in this subsection, a frame entrepreneur will be more or less successful in its effort to influence the career of an issue. As 'what is being talked about depends on who is doing the talking'<sup>25</sup>, we still need to discuss how this framing process relates to the second factor likely to be affected by agenda-setters, namely the institutional venues.

#### *Venue-shopping, coalitions and capacity-building*

The venue-shopping literature is built on the premise that political actors 'try to alter the roster of participants who are involved in the issue by seeking out the most favourable venue for the consideration of their issues'.<sup>26</sup> In this theory, policy change can occur as a result of a shift of the institutional decision-making arenas – the venues – concerned with a particular issue. Emphasizing the notion that 'controlling agendas is about controlling participation',<sup>27</sup> this perspective highlights the fact that strategic political actors will try to involve those actors in the decision-making process who share the same interests and the

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<sup>25</sup> S. Princen, *Agenda-Setting in the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> F. Baumgartner & B. Jones, "Agenda Dynamics and Policy Subsystems", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1991, p. 1045.

<sup>27</sup> S. Princen, "Agenda-setting strategies in EU policy processes", *Journal of EU Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 7, 2011, p. 929.

same values while excluding the others. In Princen's words, policy entrepreneurs will seek to 'mobilize their supporters' by directing the issue in the right venue.

As Princen rightly puts it, venues differ in their receptiveness, depending on the task they are supposed to carry out, their authority to deal with certain issues, and their composition.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, as Rhinard puts forward, the Commission's DGs are 'stovepiped', meaning that each DG has a different organizational culture, seeks to keep its policy prerogatives and conflict with others for the ownership of resources.<sup>29</sup> This analysis is also backed up by Manuel Szapiro when he states that 'each DG has its own predominant ideology, loyalties, language(s), structure, working style/methods/culture, etc.'<sup>30</sup> To further elaborate this point, one could draw from the 'advocacy coalition framework' to think of the Eurozone economic governance as a 'policy subsystem' in which participants would be aggregated in two 'advocacy coalitions' (ECFIN and EPSCO) that share similar policy core beliefs.<sup>31</sup> Bearing this assumption in mind,<sup>32</sup> one might expect the different coalitions involved in the new economic governance of the EMU to develop their own policy frames and to try to translate them into the EMU governance. Turning back to the question of the mobilization of supporters, it is likely that frame entrepreneurs will frame an issue in a way that taps into the belief system of advocacy coalitions so as to build support for their stand.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, hypotheses made by Sabatier *et al.* concerning policy change seem particularly relevant for this research. In their view, the policy core of a governmental program would remain the same unless the advocacy coalition that instituted it loses its supremacy. For this to happen there needs to be significant perturbations external to the subsystem which alter the distribution of political resources or the views of coalitions within the subsystem.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> M. Rhinard, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> M. Szapiro, *The European Commission: a practical guide*, London, John Harper, 2013, p. 77.

<sup>31</sup> P.A. Sabatier & C.M. Weible, "The Advocacy Coalition Framework. Innovations and clarifications", in P.A. Sabatier (ed.), *Theories of the Policy Process*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2007, p. 196.

<sup>32</sup> In view of space limitations, this assumption will not be tested in this working paper.

<sup>33</sup> M. Rhinard, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

However, if an issue is to be directed to another venue, policy entrepreneurs will also need to convince others that the venue involved is sufficiently equipped to deal with that issue.<sup>34</sup> Within the EU, capacity-building efforts may take the form of an enhancement of the technical expertise or of an increase in manpower or financial resources.<sup>35</sup> Regarding social policy at EU level, Wendon has demonstrated that the Commission, and especially DG V,<sup>36</sup> had actively sought out to build up new arrangements such as the Social and the Civic Dialogue in order to circumvent the Member States' influence.<sup>37</sup> In the field of social and employment policy, such networks already exist which have been built up in the context of the Lisbon Strategy and the 'Open Method of Coordination'. National experts regularly meet in different committees to exchange best practices via peer review mechanisms. Assuming that these networks of experts belong to the EPSCO coalition, one could thus expect them to be strategically used by the Commission to assist its own expertise. Two hypotheses may thus be built with regard to the strategies usually employed by agenda-setters as well as the actual outcome of this agenda-setting process.

(H2) Agenda-setters have strategically framed the issue in order to arouse interest and claim authority, and directed it towards their coalition's venue so as to mobilize their supporters and convince of their capacity to deal with it.

(H3) The policy core of the new economic governance of the EMU has changed as a result of the agenda-setting process of this issue.

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<sup>34</sup> S. Princen, "Agenda-setting strategies in EU policy processes", *Journal of EU Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 7, 2011, p. 930.

<sup>35</sup> B. Wendon, "The Commission as image-venue entrepreneur in EU social policy", *Journal of EU Public Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1998, p. 343.

<sup>36</sup> DG V is the former name of the DG EMPL.

<sup>37</sup> B. Wendon, *Ibidem*.



Table 1 Summary of the hypotheses

Issue career	(H1) As a ‘high politics’ issue, the social dimension of the EMU has been initiated ‘from above’. It was then expanded to lower levels of decision-making. Throughout its career, this issue has faced both vertical and horizontal ‘blockades’.
Agenda-setting strategies	(H2) Agenda-setters have strategically framed this issue in order to arouse interest and claim authority and directed it towards their coalition’s venue so as to mobilize their supporters and convince of their capacity to deal with it.
Agenda-setting outcome	(H3) The policy core of the new economic governance of the EMU has changed as a result of the agenda-setting process of this issue.

In the next section these hypotheses will be tested by retracing the whole agenda-setting process of the issue of the social dimension of the EMU from the negotiations around the ‘Six-pack’ until recently.

## 2 Pushing the agenda for a social EMU: a missed opportunity?

In this second section, I shall retrace the agenda-setting process of the strengthening of the social dimension of the EMU from the beginning of the negotiations around the ‘Six-pack’ in early 2011 to the present. I shall test the hypotheses elaborated above by drawing on official documents as well as on interviews carried out with key EU and national officials.

### 2.1 The initial takeover of the European semester by the ECFIN coalition

There is little doubt that the new economic governance has been essentially determined by the economic and financial actors at the EU level (DG ECFIN, ECOFIN Council, Economic Policy Committee, Economic and Financial Committee).<sup>38</sup> This takeover raises questions insofar as these actors presumably share the same beliefs about the economic governance. For some scholars, these beliefs would be strongly pervaded with ‘ordoliberal’

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<sup>38</sup> P. Pochet, “What’s wrong with EU2020?”, *ETUI Policy Brief*, no 2., Brussels, ETUI, 2010.; C. de la Porte & E. Heins, *op. cit.*

principles<sup>39</sup> and would tend to understand social policies solely through the lens of growth and competitiveness.<sup>40</sup> For instance, in the areas of pensions, labour market organisation or labour law, ‘country-specific recommendations’ (CSRs) issued at the end of the European semester consistently point out the necessary match between life expectancy and pensionable age and call for active labour market policies as well as labour market deregulation.<sup>41</sup> This observation is in line with our assumption of a ‘stovepiped’ Commission made up of DGs with different cultures and ideologies that tend to translate their beliefs into policies. It is also consistent with the argument raised above concerning strategic framing. Copeland and James have indeed very clearly demonstrated that Europe 2020 had been strategically framed by DG ECFIN as the ‘way out of the crisis’ in order to remain the key player in the policy subsystem.

On the one hand, this policy venue was ‘ontologically’ receptive to the economic crisis because it had the authority to deal with economic and financial affairs and because it is mainly composed of economists who care about such issues. On the other hand, DG ECFIN has framed Europe 2020 in such a manner that the reduction of public deficits was presented as the overarching goal of the strategy.<sup>42</sup> One may think that this was all done in order to keep their privileged position in the European semester and to increase both their financial and bureaucratic resources. The same can actually been said for the whole set of instruments of the new economic governance. Different interviewees, who one might assume to belong to the EPSCO coalition, indeed share the view that they have been totally excluded from the

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<sup>39</sup> C. Barbier, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> M. Jepsen, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> C. Degryse, M. Jepsen and P. Pochet, “The Euro crisis and its impact on national and European social policies”, *Working paper*, Brussels, ETUI, May 2013, pp. 25-26.

<sup>42</sup> P. Copeland & S. James, “Policy windows, ambiguity and Commission entrepreneurship: explaining the relaunch of the European Union’s economic reform agenda”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1-19.

discussions on the new EMU governance in favor of the ECFIN coalition. These latter discussions were, in all likelihood, restricted to very confidential arenas.<sup>43</sup>

However, far from being cast in stone, the European semester should be considered more as a slowly maturing object that leaves room for evolution. For example, Vanhercke has demonstrated that greater account has gradually been taken of the social and employment issues during the semester.<sup>44</sup> Before confirming this observation, the next sections will explain how social and employment actors have tried to respond to the initial takeover of the economic governance by the economic and financial actors.

## **2.2 The humble beginnings of a social EMU**

Although the first developments of the new economic governance were to a greater extent driven by economic and financial actors at both Council and Commission level, social and employment actors have not been silent. Interestingly, a member of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) pointed out the fact that the SPC and the Employment Committee (EMCO), which in his own words form part of the EPSCO coalition, have been trying to get a say in the European semester by using their own instruments as a kind of “Trojan horse”.<sup>45</sup>

However, one major problem faced by these actors in their ambition to re-socialize the semester was the issue of the legal basis. If we go back to Princen’s theory, this issue directly refers to the strategy of ‘claiming authority’. As already mentioned above, policy actors willing to strengthen the social dimension of the EMU will have to convince their opponents of the legitimacy of an EU intervention in this field, which is far from straightforward. This can be done, as suggested by Princen, in two ways: either by framing the issue in such a way

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014; Interview with a Belgian official, Social Protection Committee, Brussels, 5 March 2014; Interview with Philippe Lamberts, MEP (Greens/EFA), 23 April 2014.

<sup>44</sup> B. Vanhercke, “Under the radar? EU social policy in times of austerity”, in B. Vanhercke & D. Natali, (eds.), *Social Developments in the European Union 2012*, Brussels, ETUI, 2013, p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a Belgian official, Social Protection Committee, Brussels, 5 March 2014.

that it falls under the field of competencies of the EU, or by identifying common challenges faced by the whole EU that would require a common response. Crucially, as regards the new economic governance and especially its ‘backbone’, the ‘Six-pack’, one could say that its legal basis has been indirectly extended to the Title IX (Employment) of the Treaty on the functioning of the EU (TFEU) thanks to the work of Pervenche Bérès, a French MEP from the S&D group and chairwoman of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL). In her opinion reports on three of the five regulations included in the ‘Six-pack’,<sup>46</sup> Pervenche Bérès tried to extend the legal basis of these instruments to Article 148 TFEU which deals with the coordination of employment policies. Even if this maximalist position<sup>47</sup> did not eventually pass, she nevertheless managed to include several amendments to the Commission proposal that directly referred to Article 148 TFEU, as illustrated by Article 2-a, paragraph 2, alinea (b) of the Regulation 1175/2011 and the recital 16 of the Regulation 1176/2011:

“2. The European semester shall include: [...] (b) the formulation, and the examination of the implementation, of the employment guidelines that must be taken into account by Member States in accordance with Article 148(2) TFEU (employment guidelines).”<sup>48</sup>

“(16) [...] The in-depth review should take into account, where appropriate, Council recommendations or invitations addressed to Member States under review in accordance with Articles 121, 126, and 148 TFEU [...]”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> European Parliament, Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs for the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) No 1466/97 on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions and the surveillance and coordination of economic policies (COM(2010)0526 – C7-0300/2010 – 2010/0280(COD)), Brussels, 18 March 2011; European Parliament, Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs for the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on enforcement measures to correct excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the euro area (COM(2010)0525 – C7-0299/2010 – 2010/0279(COD)), 18 March 2011; European Parliament, Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs for the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances (COM(2010)0527 – C7-0301/2010 – 2010/0281(COD)), Brussels, 23 March 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

<sup>48</sup> European Parliament and Council, Regulation (EU) No 1175/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 1466/97 on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions and the surveillance and coordination of economic policies.

<sup>49</sup> European Parliament and Council, Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances.

In justifying this *de facto* extension of the legal basis of the ‘Six-pack’, Bérès invoked the increasing divergences and social imbalances between Member States and the need to address this issue at the EU level.<sup>50</sup> In other words, it seems that Bérès has strategically framed the issue by identifying social imbalances as a challenge faced by the whole EU, thereby justifying an intervention at EU level. In so doing, she tried to put employment and social issues to the fore. In her view, the new governance is not just about the surveillance of budgetary policies and macroeconomic imbalances but is also concerned with job creation and employment coordination. It is also worth pointing out the fact that Bérès linked her proposal to the overarching goal of meeting the Europe 2020 targets, which can be compared to what Princen called a strategy for arousing interest through ‘big words’. Finally, as underlined by Bérès, including a reference to Article 148 also means opening the door for a greater involvement of social and employment actors, namely the SPC and the EMCO, in the European semester.<sup>51</sup> In accordance with Princen’s theory, we could then consider that this indirect extension of the semester to the Title IX of the TFEU also served as a means to mobilize potential supporters by directing the issue towards the ‘EPSCO’ venue.

However, as stressed by a member of the cabinet of the European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, this first entry of employment and social issues in the European semester through the back door has widely gone unnoticed and has not dispelled all the doubts about the EU involvement in such an area.<sup>52</sup> This observation may be seen as confirming the first part of my first hypothesis, according to which the ‘high politics’ nature of this issue prevents low-level decision-makers such as MEPs from drawing the attention of higher-level policy-makers to it. In fact, it was not until late 2012 that the idea of developing a

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<sup>50</sup> European Parliament, Opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs for the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances (COM(2010)0527 – C7-0301/2010 – 2010/0281(COD)), Brussels, 23 March 2011.

<sup>51</sup> European Parliament, *op. cit.*

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

genuine social dimension for the EMU was truly evoked at the highest political level. With the discussion around the ‘Two-pack’ and on possible reinforced sanctions, the debate indeed has started to focus on the particular situation of the EMU compared to that of the EU-27. Two reasons may explain this shift of focus towards the EMU. First, the legal basis to impose sanctions provided for in the ‘Two-pack’ is different for EMU countries and for non-Eurozone countries. Second, the fear of a “Grexit”, the withdrawal of Greece from the eurozone, has intensely motivated European decision-makers to address the specific issue of the eurozone.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, a broad discussion followed in the three institutions on the possible ways of enhancing the EMU integration. As part of this discussion emerged the issue of a strengthened social dimension for the EMU. The European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs already delivered a speech at the meeting of the College of Commissioners in June 2012 calling upon the development of a social dimension besides the already existing budgetary and economic dimensions. However, within the Commission, nothing special came out of this speech.<sup>54</sup> In fact, at this stage the Presidency of the European Council associated to the ECB and the Presidency of the Commission were only thinking to broadly outline the major strands of the specific governance framework for the EMU. On 26 June 2012, the Presidency of the European Council released a report entitled ‘Towards a genuine economic and monetary union’ which said very little about a potential social dimension.<sup>55</sup> In this report, Herman Van Rompuy committed to develop, in collaboration with the Presidents of the Commission, the ECB and the Eurogroup, a more precise roadmap for the achievement of a genuine EMU by the end of the year 2012.

Interestingly, the day of publication of this latter report, high level meetings were arranged between the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the four Presidents

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

<sup>55</sup> European Council, Towards a genuine economic and monetary union. Report by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy, EUCO 120/12, Brussels, 26 June 2012.

in order for the trade unions to present their ‘Social Compact for Europe’.<sup>56</sup> These meetings were the opportunity for trade unions to provide input for discussions on the completion of the EMU that were due to take place at June European Council. However, when comparing the content of this “Social Compact” to the conclusions of the June European Council, one cannot but notice that the idea of giving equal footing to the social dimension and the economic and fiscal governance was supposedly not yet shared by the Heads of State and Government. Of course, social concerns are not totally absent from these conclusions. But still, the ‘recipes’ put forward by the European Council and the ETUC to tackle the crisis are diametrically opposed.

However, trade unions are not the only actors trying to move the social dimension of the EMU on to the agenda. On 20 November 2012, the European Parliament indeed published a resolution including recommendations on the abovementioned report of the European Council.<sup>57</sup> In this resolution, social issues are highlighted on several occasions. There are several references to the ‘European social model’ and the overarching goal of the EU and its Member States to ensure social inclusion and a high level of employment as laid down in Articles 9 TFEU (the so-called ‘horizontal social clause’), 151 TFEU and 153 TFEU. Turning to the specific recommendations included in this resolution, the European Parliament calls for: an improvement of the European semester by developing EU instruments for social protection and minimum standards; a greater synergy between budgetary surveillance and Europe 2020 targets; and the establishment of a ‘social pact’ for Europe aimed at balancing fiscal and macroeconomic benchmarks with employment and social benchmarks. Once again, it seems that the European Parliament made heavy use of ‘big words’ in this report, namely by

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<sup>56</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, *A Social Compact for Europe. ETUC resolution adopted by the Executive Committee at its meeting on 5-6 June 2012*, <[http://www.etuc.org/documents/social-compact-europe#.U2yS1v1\\_vQU](http://www.etuc.org/documents/social-compact-europe#.U2yS1v1_vQU)> (last accessed 28 April 2014).

<sup>57</sup> European Parliament, European Parliament resolution of 20 November 2012 with recommendations to the Commission on the report of the Presidents of the European Council, the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup “Towards a genuine Economic and Monetary Union” (2012/2151(INI)), P7\_TA(2012)0430.

repeatedly referring to the ‘European social model’, to core values of the EU project or to specific commitments such as the Europe 2020 targets. This assertion is once again in line with Princen’s theory according to which the purpose of such a strategy is to arouse interest in a given issue. One could also contend that this strategy would aim to convince the EU authorities to deal with such an issue.

Ten days later, it was the Commission’s turn to present its own vision on the future of the EMU through the issuance of its communication entitled ‘A blueprint for a deep and genuine economic and monetary union. Launching a European Debate’.<sup>58</sup> From the point of view of the rebalancing of the European semester, this communication clearly appears less ambitious than the European Parliament’s resolution. Social issues are somewhat overlooked and the discussion focuses to a greater extent on the development of necessary stabilization mechanisms for the eurozone, such as a true fiscal capacity to address asymmetric shocks, and on ideas of contractual arrangements between the Member States and the Commission. However, the blueprint hints the necessary reinforcement of the coordination and the surveillance of employment and social policies and, perhaps more importantly, refers to the unemployment benefit scheme in the United States.<sup>59</sup> According to my interviewee, the inclusion of these two elements was essentially driven by DG EMPL and was at that time qualified as revolutionary.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, at this moment, the strengthening of the social dimension of the EMU was still not a very prominent issue on the EU political agenda. Despite the many appeals made by the European Parliament, the trade unions and to a lesser extent the European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, the prospect of developing it was still rather weak. Briefly said, neither Pervenche Bérès nor the ETUC have succeeded in genuinely

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<sup>58</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission. A blueprint for a deep and genuine economic and monetary union. Launching a European Debate, Brussels, 30 November 2012, COM (2012) 777 final/2.

<sup>59</sup> European Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.



initiating the issue of the social dimension of the EMU. All in all, all these appeals appear to have faced both horizontal and vertical blockades, thus providing some evidence for the last part of my first hypothesis.

### **2.3 The counter-attack of the social and employment actors**

The triggering event for the development of a social dimension for the EMU was the European Council on 13-14 December 2012. In line with the ongoing work done by all three institutions, Heads of State and Government were due to discuss the completion of the EMU. Quite surprisingly, in the conclusions of the European Council, the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission pledged themselves to prepare measures for the June 2013 European Council, amongst which measures concerning the ‘social dimension of the EMU, including social dialogue’.<sup>61</sup> This commitment is all the more striking that the draft conclusions of this same Council made no mention whatsoever of the social dimension of the EMU.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, I do not have access to insider information that could explain this attitudinal change on the part of Member States as regards the social dimension of the EMU. Nevertheless, one might probably consider that this new element in the conclusions was partly the result of bilateral negotiations between France and Germany conducted in parallel of the European summit.<sup>63</sup> Other interviewees also pointed out the political legitimization objective pursued by high-level policy-makers as well as their willingness to reassure the public that ‘the building of Europe was not only aimed at imposing budgetary rules but was also a matter of social justice’.<sup>64</sup> However, at first sight, the impact of such a reference to the social dimension in the conclusions of the European Council should not be overestimated. It has certainly helped to move this issue on to the EU political agenda, but it nonetheless did not

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<sup>61</sup> European Council, *Conclusions 13/14 December Council*, Brussels, 14 December 2012, EUCO 205/12.

<sup>62</sup> European Council, *Draft conclusions European Council (13-14 December 2012)*, Brussels, 3 December 2012, 15632/12.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with a Belgian official, Social Protection Committee, Brussels, 5 March 2014. (author’s translation)

prevent it from being watered down or hidden away afterwards. Many people indeed downplayed the importance of this sentence after the Council.<sup>65</sup>

It is worth stressing at this stage that without such an impetus from the European Council, the next developments of the social dimension of the EMU would not likely have been imaginable. As already mentioned, this issue, by taking the road ‘from below’ (that is to say, the one which passed through the EP, the EC and some stakeholders), appears to have faced vertical and horizontal blockades. Consequently, in confirmation of my first hypothesis, it definitely seems that the only institution able to initiate this issue was the European Council. In accordance with Princen *et al.*,<sup>66</sup> one could argue that initiating this issue amounted for the European Council to a symbolic commitment.

This commitment, however, required further specification from lower-level political actors, namely at the Commission level. In order to test the second hypothesis, I shall now explain how this specification process has been characterized by a turf battle between the EPSCO and ECFIN coalitions and how these actors made use of the strategies depicted by Princen *et al.*

Following the December European Council, European Commission President Barroso asked László Andor to give substance to the abovementioned high-level commitment by preparing a Communication on the social dimension of the EMU. DG EMPL thus took the lead in the policy-shaping phase by holding the pen. According to Hartlapp *et al.*, one may thus argue that DG EMPL had a structural advantage over its adversaries with respect to policy framing.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, this advantage was supplemented with the powerful support on the one hand, of Herman Van Rompuy, who came at the EPSCO Council of March to meet

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

<sup>66</sup> S. Princen & M. Rhinard, “Crashing and creeping: agenda-setting dynamics in the European Union”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 13, no. 7, 2006, p. 1121.

<sup>67</sup> M. Hartlapp, J. Metz & C. Rauh, *op. cit.*

László Andor and the EU Ministers of employment and social affairs during a lunch organized prior to the session, and, on the other hand, of the Irish Presidency of the EU.<sup>68</sup> This joint involvement of DG EMPL, the EPSCO ministers, the Presidency of the Council and the Presidency of the EU created momentum for the development of the social dimension of the EMU. On the one hand, this undoubtedly helped DG EMPL to strengthen its position within the European Commission by reinforcing its credibility and, on the other hand, this helped to bring shared ideas about the social dimension out of the initial “primeval soup” of ideas<sup>69</sup> and to arouse the interest of many key EU decision-makers, at least the EU Ministers of employment and social affairs.

The early days of the policy-shaping phase seem thus to have been characterized by the framing attempts of what might be now called the EPSCO coalition (DG EMPL and EPSCO Council) supported by Herman Van Rompuy and the Irish Presidency. Afterwards, it was the Commission’s role to more fully develop the substance of the social dimension of the EMU. The Communication on the social dimension of the EMU was initially meant to be published by late May 2013. However, during the internal drafting process, things were further complicated by the strong opposition from DG ECFIN and by the specific context of the moment, especially the German federal elections due to take place on 22 September.<sup>70</sup> The release of the Communication was thus postponed to October 2013.

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<sup>68</sup> Irish Presidency of the European Union, “EU Employment and Social Affairs Council to focus on Youth Guarantee and Employment”, <<http://eu2013.ie/news/news-items/20130227pre-epsco/pr/>> (last accessed 28 April 2014).

<sup>69</sup> J.W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, New-York, Longman, 2011, updated 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

## **2.4 A communication to strengthen the social dimension: two steps forward, one step backward?**

The Communication of the Commission entitled ‘Strengthening the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union’ was published on 2 October 2013.<sup>71</sup> According to this Communication, the social dimension of the EMU refers to:

‘[...] the ability of economic governance mechanisms and policy instruments to identify, take into account and address problematic developments and challenges related to employment and social policies in the EMU.’<sup>72</sup>

This Communication revolves around three main axes, namely (1) the reinforcement of the surveillance and of the coordination of employment and social challenges/policies; (2) the improvement of solidarity mechanisms and labour mobility; and (3) the strengthening of the social dialogue. Of these three axes, the first one is the most developed and has attracted the most attention. I shall therefore focus more particularly on the initiatives aimed at better monitoring of social and employment challenges and improving policy coordination in the EMU.

The flagship initiative proposed by the Commission with respect to this first line of action has been to create two additional scoreboards of social and employment indicators to be respectively included in the Joint Employment Report (JER) and in the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP). As the President of the Employment Committee put it, the idea to set up a new scoreboard was furthermore one of the only points of agreement in the EPSCO Council.<sup>73</sup> This observation is consistent with what Copeland and James have demonstrated,

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<sup>71</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Strengthening the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union, Brussels, 2 October 2013, COM (2013) 690 provisoire.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Tom Bevers, President of the Employment Committee, Brussels, 28 February 2014.

namely that for a policy frame to be effective, it has to be in line with the Member States' positions. One could also argue that, in accordance with Rhinard's perspective on framing success, building a scoreboard remains a vague proposal and does not bring a too radical institutional shift, which can explain its support from the EPSCO Council and, afterwards, from the European Council. Furthermore, suggesting the creation of a scoreboard could well be assimilated to what Princen called a framing strategy through "small steps" insofar as such an allegedly technocratic instrument will be perceived as a non-contentious matter, therefore allowing for a gradual interest to be raised.

The first scoreboard includes the five following headline indicators: unemployment level and changes; "NEET" rate (young people not in education, employment or training) and youth unemployment rate; real gross disposable income of households; at-risk-of-poverty rate of working age population; and inequalities (S80/S20 ratio). The second scoreboard consists of the following four auxiliary<sup>74</sup> indicators: participation rate, long-term unemployment ratio, youth unemployment rate (complemented by the proportion of NEET), and the 'at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion' rate. Interestingly, while the first scoreboard of headline indicators included in the JER was the initiative of DG EMPL, establishing another social scoreboard to be included in the MIP was DG ECFIN's will. This is because the JER is the responsibility of DG EMPL (in collaboration with EPSCO actors) whereas the MIP remains totally in the hands of DG ECFIN. Each actor therefore wanted to keep the control of what could be said about social and employment issues during the European semester.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, since the MIP and its scoreboard of macroeconomic indicators are based on more solid legal foundations (through the 'Six-pack') than the JER (which is part of Europe 2020 strategy), DG EMPL did not want to 'offer' its social scoreboard to DG ECFIN in the

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<sup>74</sup> An auxiliary indicator is used to help interpret the results obtained for a 'headline' indicator.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Tom Bevers, President of the Employment Committee, Brussels, 28 February 2014; Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

MIP framework for fear that it might ultimately be hijacked and called into question on legal grounds.

These observations partly confirm my second hypothesis according to which agenda-setters try to direct the issue towards their coalition's venue. In the debate on the social scoreboard, a proposal made by DG EMPL was particularly sensitive and gave rise to tough confrontations with the Cabinet of Commissioner Rehn, namely the proposal to establish thresholds in order to better monitor the excessive social slippages in the Member States. In DG EMPL's view, if a Member State would have reached values above the threshold defined for an indicator, it could automatically have led to recommendations from the Commission to correct this problem. Two broad reasons may explain the fierce opposition from DG ECFIN as regards this question. First, thresholds considerably improve the readability of the scoreboard, which is no longer restricted to experts but can be easily interpreted by anyone. Everyone would therefore have been able to appreciate the disastrous social and employment situation in the Member States and to draw conclusions on how the crisis has been tackled by DG ECFIN since its onset. Second, inserting thresholds in the social scoreboard would have meant a clear weakening of DG ECFIN's own scoreboard of macroeconomic indicators. Both scoreboards would have been put on an equal footing, which could have required difficult arbitration at some point.<sup>76</sup>

Moreover, in the Council, only a small minority of Member States (among others, Belgium, France, Austria, Italy and Luxembourg) supported the inclusion of thresholds in the social scoreboard. There were indeed concerns in some Member States that such a scoreboard with thresholds could trigger new sanctions and that their wrists would eventually be slapped

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014; Interview with Tom Bevers, President of the Employment Committee, Brussels, 28 February 2014.

again by Brussels.<sup>77</sup> Turning back to my theoretical framework, one may therefore argue that the attempts from the ‘EPSCO coalition’ to direct the issue of the social dimension towards their venue were only partly successful. On the one hand, they managed to retain control over, and responsibility for, the social scoreboard included in the JER. But on the other hand, their adversaries in DG ECFIN have succeeded in developing their own instrument related to the social dimension and in offsetting their small loss of power by watering down the EPSCO coalition’s proposal. This ‘horizontal blockade’ at the level of the Commission was also accompanied by a ‘vertical blockade’ on the part of some Member States that, although accepting the idea of a social scoreboard, did not want to establish thresholds for its indicators. However, even though the DG EMPL’s proposal was eventually weakened, there is no doubt that it succeeded in making this issue ultimately enter the EU decision agenda. Its proposal was indeed quickly endorsed at the December EPSCO and European Councils. Furthermore, if the success of the EPSCO coalition’s venue-shopping strategy is to be assessed in light of its potential to mobilize supporters, this strategy seems to have borne fruit, albeit imperfectly. DG EMPL has succeeded in rallying a vast array of actors around its project of developing a social scoreboard in the European semester so as to keep a closer eye on social and employment developments in the EU. Assisted by the support of the Presidency of the European Council and of the EU, DG EMPL has managed to mobilize the whole EPSCO Council, including both the EMCO and the SPC. In some way, one may consider that DG EMPL has actually used both committees in order to facilitate the adoption of the scoreboard by the Member States at the December Council. A kind of ‘informal’ meeting between the Commission and the two committees had actually been scheduled in September 2013 in Lithuania, at which the Commission had already introduced its indicators for the social scoreboard.<sup>78</sup> This surely may help explain the rather quick endorsement of the social

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<sup>77</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Tom Bevers, President of the Employment Committee, Brussels, 28 February 2014.

scoreboard at the December EPSCO and European Councils. Nevertheless, some of its potential supporters (namely the ETUC, the ‘Social Platform’, and the ‘European anti-poverty network’) did not hesitate to criticize its lack of ambition despite their overall positive attitude towards the initiative.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps more significantly, the European Parliament also criticized the non-binding nature of the social indicators in a Resolution adopted on 25 February 2014.<sup>80</sup> In spite of these criticisms, one may think that a strategic alliance with the EPSCO committees had more relevance to DG EMPL. As a matter of fact, the social scoreboard was swiftly endorsed at the December Council and was then considered as an integral component of the European semester 2013-2014.

Moreover, in working together with the EMCO and the SPC, DG EMPL also ensured its capacity to provide robust indicators, thus defusing potential criticisms. Vanhercke has already studied how the EMCO, the SPC and DG EMPL have improved their own analytical toolbox over the last few years so as to acquire a place at the table of the economic governance.<sup>81</sup> It has also been demonstrated that these three actors were acting in a more and more cooperative manner. Similarly, with respect to the social scoreboard, it can be argued that these actors have relied on each other’s analytical instruments to improve their own position in the European semester. On the one hand, DG EMPL explained in the Communication that the interpretation of its scoreboard should build on the tools already developed by the EMCO (Employment Performance Monitor) and the SPC (Social Protection Performance Monitor) as well as on the Joint Assessment Framework, which is the joint

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<sup>79</sup> European Trade Union Confederation, ETUC position on the European Commission communication on Strengthening the social dimension of Economic and Monetary Union, Brussels, 4 December 2013; Social Platform, Letter to the EPSCO Council of October 15, 2013, Brussels, 8 October 2013. <http://www.socialplatform.org/documents/social-platform-letter-to-the-epsco-council-of-october-15-2013/> (last accessed 02 May 2014); European Anti-Poverty Network, “Economic Progress needs social progress!”, EAPN Press Releases, Brussels, 16 December 2013. < <http://www.eapn.eu/en/news-and-publications/press-room/eapn-press-releases/economic-progress-needs-social-progress>> (last accessed 02 May 2014).

<sup>80</sup> European Parliament, European Parliament Resolution of 25 February 2014 on the European Semester for economic policy coordination: Employment and Social Aspects in the Annual Growth Survey 2014, 2013/2158(INI).

<sup>81</sup> B. Vanhercke, *op. cit.*, p. 104.



responsibility of the Commission and of both committees mentioned above. And on the other hand, the EMCO and the SPC have taken the advantage of the opportunity to raise the visibility of their own instruments thanks to the new social scoreboard.<sup>82</sup>

Therefore, one could argue that DG EMPL has sought the support from the EMCO and the SPC as a way to reinforce its credibility, namely by convincing competing policy-makers of its sufficient analytical capacity, and by reassuring the Member States that its authority to build the indicators of the social scoreboard basically derived from its constant dialogue with the Council committees. This seems to support my second hypothesis as regards capacity-building.

Now that a thorough analysis of the agenda-setting process of the social dimension of the EMU has been provided, we can move on to the last section of my analysis. In the next section, I intend to briefly assess to what extent this social dimension, as it appeared at the end of this agenda-setting process, has been taken into account in the European semester 2013-2014.

## **2.5 Is the social dimension of the EMU only window-dressing?**

As explained above, two new social scoreboards have been developed as a means to enhance the surveillance of social and employment challenges in the Member States. The first scoreboard of five headline indicators is meant to be included in the JER annexed to the AGS. The second scoreboard consisting of four auxiliary indicators is now part of the MIP and complements its battery of macroeconomic indicators. We should thus expect to see the second scoreboard in the Alert Mechanism Report (AMR) as well as in the In-Depth Reviews, while the first scoreboard should be discussed in the Joint Employment Report which should itself feed into the economic priorities underlined in the Annual Growth Survey (AGS). I will critically evaluate how these two scoreboards have been used, on the one hand, in the JER and

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Tom Bevers, President of the Employment Committee, Brussels, 28 February 2014. (author's translation)

the AGS and, on the other hand, in the AMR and the IDR.<sup>83</sup> This will allow me to complete the analysis provided in the previous sections by examining what the outcome of the agenda-setting process was in terms of the social rebalancing of the European semester.

#### *The social scoreboard in the JER and the AGS 2014*

For starters, one can observe that the JER 2014, adopted at the March European Council, devotes a special section of its analysis to the social scoreboard proposed by the Commission. It is worth noting that the analysis based on this scoreboard only comes second in the JER, arguably meaning that it should be used as a complement to the conventional analysis. Moreover, it is interesting to stress that the JER recalls the necessity for the reader to interpret the social scoreboard in the light of the other analytical instruments of the EPSCO coalition, namely the EPM and the SPPM. Surely, this shows once again the importance for DG EMPL to rely on its partners' capacity to enhance its own credibility. In addition, the Report suggests that the main interest of such a scoreboard lies in its greater visibility and ease of reading.<sup>84</sup> The table summing up the results for each indicator of the scoreboard drawn at the end of the report indeed provides highly condensed information on the major social and employment trends in the EU. Even though the absence of thresholds and colours makes this table less readable than it could have been, the inclusion of the 'distance from the EU average' as well as the 'annual change' tends to catch the eye on the main social and employment problems affecting the Member States.

Furthermore, indications are given to help the reader interpret the table and identify potentially worrying employment and social developments, namely the existing employment and social disparities and the dynamics of socio-economic divergence within the EU and the

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<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately, I will be unable to scrutinize how the social dimension has been considered in the Country Specific Recommendations since they are due to be released in late June.

<sup>84</sup> European Commission, Draft Joint Employment Report accompanying the Communication from the Commission on Annual Growth Survey 2014, Brussels, 13 November 2013, COM (2013) 801 final, p. 30.

euro zone.<sup>85</sup> This could be seen as an attempt from the EPSCO coalition to circumvent the absence of thresholds in the scoreboard and to strategically frame the issue to their advantage.

*In the section on the social scoreboard, it is indeed noteworthy that a great deal is made about the potential spill over effects of employment and social problems from one Member State on the others. This actually amounts to acknowledge the existence of social imbalances in the EU and the eurozone, without, however, explicitly saying so. In so doing, the EPSCO coalition arguably sought to put their social scoreboard on equal footing with the MIP scoreboard.*

Pursuing the investigation of the place of the social scoreboard in the European semester, it should be first noted that no mention is made of it in the AGS 2014.<sup>86</sup> Actually, as in every AGS since the European semester 2011-2012, one section is devoted to the analysis of the social consequences of the crisis. Hence, social issues have never been totally overlooked in the AGS. For instance, the AGS 2014 stresses the increasing share of people at risk of poverty and the growing risk of exclusion from the labour market.

*However, there are several key points which we should emphasize. First, the priorities for action with regard to employment and social policy are virtually the same since the European semester 2011-2012: promoting active labour market policies; ensuring that wage developments are in line with productivity; and improving the effectiveness of social protection systems. Second, the most innovative indicators of the new social scoreboard are left out in the AGS, namely the indicator ‘Change in Real gross disposable income of households’ (GHDI) and ‘Inequality’. As regards the former, its absence can probably be explained by the fact that DG ECFIN has never felt comfortable with it and had only accepted to include it in the social scoreboard in return for the deletion of a footnote referring to the*

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>86</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission. Annual Growth Survey 2014, COM (2013) 800 final.

*future establishment of thresholds.*<sup>87</sup> Finally, perhaps more interestingly, the policy frame developed by the EPSCO coalition in the JER with respect to social imbalances in the EU is also conspicuously absent in the AGS. The overall policy frame underlined in the AGS remains that of the competitiveness and of the fiscal austerity. This is very significant insofar as the AGS is the central document of the European semester which lays the foundations for the further process. In other words, while the JER gives an important place to the social scoreboard proposed by the Commission, the AGS is much less groundbreaking in this respect. Generally speaking, as compared to past years, the policy frame put forward therein is remained substantially the same.

Consequently, the European Council of March, which was meant to endorse the AGS and the JER, did not say anything about the newly developed social dimension and simply agreed with the same broad priorities as in the past.<sup>88</sup> Using Sabatier's theoretical tools, this amounts to saying that the ECFIN policy core is still dominant in the policy subsystem.

#### *The social scoreboard in the MIP 2014*

First of all, it is striking to observe that, for the first time since the crisis, the Alert Mechanism Report 2014 mentions the deterioration of the social situation in most EU Member States and, perhaps more importantly, the strong divergences in poverty and unemployment across the EU.<sup>89</sup> This could suggest that the policy frame developed by the EPSCO coalition according to which social imbalances are just as important as macroeconomic imbalances has been somewhat 'internalized' by the opposite coalition. Second, the AMR indicates that the new social scoreboard of four auxiliary indicators has been used to interpret the conventional MIP scoreboard. This is mirrored by the specific bullet point addressing the employment and social situation in several Member States in the second

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Laurence Weerts, member of the Cabinet of Laszlo Andor, DG EMPL, 17 January 2014.

<sup>88</sup> European Council, *Conclusions 20/21 March European Council*, Brussels, 21 March 2014, EUCO 7/14.

<sup>89</sup> European Commission, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank and the European Economic and Social Committee. Alert Mechanism Report 2014, Brussels, 13 November 2013, p. 2.

section on the ‘Progress in the Correction of Imbalances’. In this section, the AMR surprisingly notes that:

“[...] increase rates of long-term and youth unemployment, inactivity, poverty and social exclusion denote an underutilisation of resources and deterioration in social cohesion.”<sup>90</sup>

Not only does the AMR deal with issues such as poverty, youth unemployment and social exclusion but it even seems to be concerned with the social cohesion in the Member States. This is completely new when compared to the previous AMRs.

Third, further confirmation of this new ‘social sensitivity’ can be seen in the country-specific commentaries. For eleven countries out of the twenty-four concerned by these commentaries, the AMR points the finger at worrying levels of youth unemployment, long-term unemployment or even poverty. Even though these social considerations are relegated to the bottom of the list of potential imbalances, they are worthy of note. That being said, when macroeconomic imbalances are defined at the end of the report,<sup>91</sup> no mention is made of any of the auxiliary indicators included in the social scoreboard. Arguably, this could mean that when identifying risks of potential imbalances in the Member States, DG ECFIN’s services will not pay too much attention to the new social scoreboard developed by DG EMPL, thus perhaps reducing it to a window dressing exercise.

The analysis of the In-Depth Reviews reveals a somewhat different picture. On several accounts, the IDRs are illustrative of the overall little place given to the social scoreboard in the MIP. To begin with, only six countries<sup>92</sup> out of the eleven in which social issues had been put to the fore in the AMR were subject to an IDR from the Commission, thereby implicitly acknowledging that these issues were not a sufficient reason to justify a reinforced surveillance. When more deeply analyzing the IDRs for each of these six countries, we can

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<sup>90</sup> European Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> European Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Bulgaria, Ireland, Spain, Croatia, Italy and Hungary.

observe, though, that social issues are not left aside. Except for Ireland,<sup>93</sup> a more or less developed analysis is provided for each of the auxiliary indicators included in the social scoreboard. However, most of the time (in 4 of the 6 countries) this analysis is only developed in the section ‘Macroeconomic developments’, whereas the section ‘Imbalances and risks’ is mainly concerned with conventional MIP indicators. In this latter section, when it comes to examine social developments, the focus remains on unemployment and labour market policies. Hence, poverty issues appear to be sidelined, and when mentioned, these are invariably related to the inefficiencies of labour market policies and of social protection schemes in the Member States. In light of the absence of poverty concerns in the Communication from the Commission summing up the results of the IDR 2014, this observation seems to be confirmed for the whole MIP procedure.

To summarize this last subsection, we have seen that, even though both procedures (AGS and MIP) take due account of the social consequences of the crisis, a fundamental paradigm shift has not taken place as a result of the new social scoreboards. Except for the JER that stands out by its emphasis on social imbalances, the predominant ‘social’ concern expressed in the other documents remains that of the unemployment, while the reference to other social issues appears to be used as a kind of social ‘coating’ without much affecting the actual content of the recommendations made by the Commission to the Member States. Once again, it appears that the dominant policy core of the policy subsystem is that of the ECFIN coalition. Consequently, my last hypothesis seems to be invalidated.

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<sup>93</sup> No data is available for Ireland with respect to ‘People at-risk of poverty or social exclusion’.

## **Conclusion**

As a conclusion, it is worth recalling the key lessons learnt in this paper. At the end of the first part, I had elaborated three hypotheses related to the issue career, the agenda-setting strategies and the policy subsystem of the EMU governance. Concerning the first hypothesis, we have seen that far from having taken a unique road, the issue of the social dimension of the EMU has started its career ‘from below’ in the EP Committee for Employment and Social Affairs, was then gradually discussed by stakeholders and DG EMPL, and finally ended up at the level of the European Council which was, in confirmation of my first hypothesis, the only institution able to initiate this very sensitive issue..

The issue was then expanded to the Commission, where competing DGs have been striving to shape the proposal so as to translate their assumed beliefs into it and to improve upon or maintain their position in the European semester. Once specified, the issue ultimately went back to the Council for endorsement. These observations serve as a reminder of the ideal-typical nature of the ‘issue-career’ model used in this working paper. Moreover, when considering the whole agenda-setting process, there is strong evidence that the issue of the social dimension of the EMU has faced numerous blockades, particularly before it was initiated by the European Council and during the policy shaping phase in the Commission. My first hypothesis seems thus to be fully confirmed.

As far as agenda-setting strategies are concerned, my analysis has offered corroborating evidence for my second hypothesis. On the one hand, we have clearly seen that agenda-setters have been constantly trying to affect policy frames in order to arouse interest and to claim authority, using both the “big words” and the “small steps” strategies. On the other hand, I have demonstrated that agenda-setters have sought out to influence the venue in which that issue was treated in order to mobilize their coalition and to convince of their

capacity to deal with it. The hypotheses that were elaborated in accordance with Princen's theoretical framework thus appear to be confirmed.

Finally, with respect to my third hypothesis, it appears from the last section of this working paper that, despite the entrance of the social dimension of the EMU on the formal agenda, no social rebalancing of the European semester has taken place so far. Table 2 summarizes the results of my analysis.

Table 2 Summary of the results of the analysis

Issue career	(H1) As a 'high politics' issue, the social dimension of the EMU has been initiated 'from above'. It was then expanded to lower levels of decision-making. Throughout its career, this issue has faced both vertical and horizontal 'blockades'.	Confirmed
Agenda-setting strategies	(H2) Agenda-setters have strategically framed this issue in order to arouse interest and claim authority, and directed it towards their coalition's venue so as to mobilize their supporters and convince of their capacity to deal with it.	Confirmed
Agenda-setting outcome	(H3) The policy core of the new economic governance of the EMU has changed as a result of the agenda-setting process of this issue.	Refuted

Beyond these hypotheses, I have also found some support for the assumption that this policy subsystem was characterized by a turf battle between two opposing coalitions. I have indeed demonstrated that at least DG EMPL, the SPC and the EMCO were supporting each other in order to acquire a greater say in the new economic governance. However, probably for tactical reasons, neither the EP nor "social" stakeholders seem to have been included in this presumed coalition. Nevertheless, more research is needed to investigate if these actors really meet the criteria for a genuine advocacy coalition and if the same pattern may be found with respect to the ECFIN coalition.

Moreover, further research is required to more fully understand the gradual attention drawn to this issue as well as the incremental buildup of support from the higher level



decision makers. Other interviews within the dominant coalition would certainly have allowed an even more detailed analysis of the strategies used to keep the issue off the agenda. In addition, it would be worth exploring how the two social scoreboards have impacted the CSRs that have been published at the end of the European semester 2014. Arguably, one may think that these CSRs will still reflect the dominant policy core of the policy subsystem. However, it may well be that this policy subsystem will be ultimately affected by the European elections and the subsequent 'new' Commission. It is also possible that this policy core will come to be progressively challenged by the resistances of the Member States, on the one side warned not to exceed their budgetary objectives and on the other called upon to reach the Europe 2020 targets. Domestic resistances from citizens as well as appeals from the European organized civil society could also well encourage a change of course of the new economic governance.

As far as I am concerned, a real shift in the mindset of the dominant ECFIN coalition is essential if one wants to maintain a decent level of popular support for the European project. That is not to say that developing a social dimension is only a matter of legitimacy and appearance. Taking seriously into account poverty, youth unemployment or inequalities is also an economic necessity insofar as tackling those problems today amounts to invest in the human capital which will be crucial for our growth prospects tomorrow. As I have demonstrated throughout this paper, the new economic governance is a maturing process which might very well evolve in that direction. But for this to happen, agenda-setters will need to keep the notion of the social dimension alive and continue their struggle to make it a reality.

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